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ABSTRACT

This study investigated differences between student teachers prepared in Iowa State University's contextual teacher preparation program (Project Opportunity) and student teachers prepared via traditional teacher education. Project Opportunity offered college-school collaboration and extensive field experiences at alternating rural, urban, and suburban sites. The study involved questionnaires to gather feedback from student teachers, university supervisors, and school cooperating teachers. The questionnaires examined prediction of success, confidence, professional background, personal attributes, instructional skill, classroom management, application of knowledge, holistic understanding, student interactions, university faculty interactions, and professional opportunities. Students were surveyed on all constructs, whereas cooperating teachers and supervisors were only surveyed for the first eight constructs. Data analysis indicated that the major constructs of Project Opportunity were working successfully, with students, faculty, and public school teachers noting specific areas of excellence in Project Opportunity students. Project Opportunity taught school and university faculty about the importance of bonding within a cohort, the need for enhanced opportunities in research, the necessity of incorporating more classroom management techniques into coursework, and the urgency for more early and frequent field experiences. Results showed that Project Opportunity students had higher confidence levels, advanced professional thinking, and a more holistic view in thinking than did traditionally prepared students. Project Opportunity students felt more confident in their interpersonal characteristics and professional abilities. (Contains 16 references.) (SM)

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# A COMPARISON OF CONTEXTUAL TEACHER PREPARATION STUDENT TEACHERS WITH TRADITIONALLY PREPARED STUDENT TEACHERS

## (A Preliminary Study)

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## Introduction

As educators and administrators strive to improve teacher education programs, many ideas for restructuring college curricula to coordinate with long range and complex educational proposals have been endorsed. (The Holmes Group, 1986; Goodlad, 1991; U.S. Office, 1991). Although each of these groups has their own set of recommendations, areas of consensus emerge: 1) a collaborative or collegial K-12 school-university setting, 2) methods of providing and modeling authentic assessment, 3) earlier and increased number of field experiences for preservice teachers, 4) changed college curricula, and 5) opportunity to participate in a socialization process to enhance the culture of learning.

The Iowa State University contextual teacher preparation program, Project Opportunity, emerged in response to these recommendations through long-range planning and collaboration with faculty members, cohort site school personnel and preservice students. The result is an alternative teacher preparation program in which a cohort group of thirty elementary education students, secondary education students and early childhood education students travel through their sophomore, junior and senior years together taking selected courses and participating in expanded field experiences. A new cohort is established each year at alternating rural, urban and suburban sites.

## Background

In 1991, the Department of Curriculum and Instruction in the College of Education at Iowa State University initiated discussions among faculty and staff to conceptualize a new and better teacher preparation program. The investigation was conducted in a reflective manner by studying many of the current teacher education reform models, attending regional and national conferences, and conversing with university faculty and administrators and public-school faculty and administrators. The committee evaluated collected input, adapted pieces from several reform movements, and designed an experimental program built around several central themes and beliefs about teacher preparation. The themes have implications for the creation of the program's outcomes and evaluation of the success of the program (Owen, 1993). Those themes are 1) integration, 2) new learning roles, 3) technology, 4) diversity, and 5) democracy.

With the identification of the above themes, the committee selected four issues to address: 1) the nature of collaboration between K-12 schools and the university, 2) the need for preservice teachers to experience quality field experiences earlier and more often (Connor and Killmer, 1996), 3) the reconception of formal academic coursework in both the College of Education and Liberal Arts and Sciences, and 4) the formation of a cohort group to include majors in elementary, early childhood and secondary education.

Choosing cohort groups to deliver the redesigned contextual Project Opportunity program was the one essential difference of the experimental program from what other recommending groups were promoting. The goal of cohort groups was to develop a sense of community among the cohort students and between them and the faculty, staff and students of the partner school district and faculty of the College of Education. Cohesiveness, shared experiences and on-going dialogue seem to be common strengths of the cohort groups (Blankenship, 1989; Holmes Group, 1986). If we believe learning is the construction of meaning as a consequence of experience, then the teachers in partner schools must be empowered and encouraged to provide opportunities for the cohort group to experience. The university faculty would provide opportunities for dialogue and reflection about application of theory to those experiences. A main objective for the cohort group was to form a bond to support and encourage each other as they practice teacher collegiality

## Program Description

Members of the first cohort group of thirty selected for Project Opportunity began in the fall of 1993 and graduated the spring 1996. Beginning each fall since, a new group of 30 students have formed a cohort, spending their sophomore, junior and senior years together in a collaborative relationship at one school site. ( A collaborative school site generally consists of 2-3 elementary schools, a middle

school and a high school.) The most recent cohort, number 6, began in the fall of 1998. Cohorts have been placed alternately in urban, rural and suburban sites.

The selected students meet all the requirements of the traditional teacher education program in unique ways and also experience activities which are highly different from the traditional program. For example, field experiences have been added to their social foundations, teaching strategies and multicultural/nonsexist teaching courses. An English course has been adapted to investigate the relationship of television to education and new courses in democracy and action research have been added. These courses are designed to foster the development of a reflective practitioner.

The new courses are taken as a group and most of the regular professional courses are also taken together. The four methodology courses (science, mathematics, reading/language arts and social studies) are taken through an integrated approach during one semester. An 8 week practicum is part of that experience. Over 300 hours of early field experience are taken over the three year period prior to student teaching, as compared to the traditional program requirement of 63 hours. At least one field experience occurs each semester to assure continuity, and all 300 hours of early field experience are completed at the cohort's designated collaborative site.

A steering committee composed of interested faculty, course instructors, partner school participants and student representatives meets regularly to plan and oversee policy regarding Project Opportunity. Each semester, specific courses are designated as cohort sections and the course content is restructured to fit the broadened range (pre-k - secondary) and the main themes of integration, new learning roles, technology, diversity and democracy

## Methodology

The evaluation and research portion of Project Opportunity is overseen by a faculty committee and the Research Institute for Studies in Education (RISE) in the College of Education. Any research projects related to Project Opportunity are approved by the committee and, in some cases, funded through professional advancement grants.

The study described in this paper comparing the success of contextually prepared student teachers (Project Opportunity) with traditionally prepared student teachers began in the spring of 1996 when the first cohort group graduated. Since that time, groups of cohort students have been surveyed each semester as they have graduated. To date, five cohorts of contextually prepared students have been surveyed on their readiness and success. The data presented here represent a merging of responses from cohorts one through five.

Two questionnaires were developed, one to gather feedback from student teachers, and one to obtain feedback from university supervisors and school cooperating teachers. Likert scales ranging from four to five options were used with questions developed to survey the constructs listed below:

- Prediction of success
- Confidence
- Professional background
- Preparation
- Personal attributes
- Instructional skill
- Classroom management
- Application of Knowledge
- Holistic Understanding
- Student interactions
- University faculty interactions
- Professional opportunities

*Note: Students were surveyed for all constructs, whereas cooperating teachers/supervisors were only surveyed for the first eight.*

The student form contained 113 questions and was sent to 316 traditional student teachers. All traditional students were surveyed the first year, and for the past two years, the number of graduating Project Opportunity students (doubled) has set the number of traditional students to be sampled. (For example, if there were 40 Project Opportunity students, 24 elementary/16 early childhood, then 48 traditional elementary and 32 early childhood would be surveyed.) The survey categories were arranged randomly, so students were unaware of which skill or ability was being assessed. The return rate was 50%. The survey was also sent to all 54 Project Opportunity graduates who have finished student teaching to date. Thirty eight were returned, for a response rate of 70%. Only early childhood and elementary student results were analyzed for this study. The secondary results were not used because of significant differences in their programs, which were beyond our control.

Since the number of Project Opportunity graduates is relatively small at this point in our study, the surveys will continue to be given to the same groups at the end of each semester for an indefinite period of years. Eventually, a move beyond the basic comparison of the two groups of students is planned. Differences in student teacher level (secondary, elementary and early childhood), agreement between student teacher, cooperating teacher and supervisor assessments of student teacher success and comparison of randomly placed students and those matched with coops are topics which could be studied in the future.

To establish the reliability of the survey forms used in assessing the selected constructs, Cronbach's Alpha test was utilized. P-values were established for each of the twelve constructs, both for student surveys and for cooperating teacher/supervisor surveys. The standard of a .05 or less value was used to determine significance. Strong reliability was confirmed.

## Student Results

A standard t-test for independent samples was utilized to determine if there were differences in the means of the two different groups of student teachers. P-values were derived from the results. Table 1 summarizes the p-values for the twelve constructs selected for the student portion of the study. Student scores with a p-value of .05 and below indicate which of the constructs showed major differences between the Project Opportunity and traditional groups of student teachers.

**TABLE 1**

| CONSTRUCTS | P-VALUES |
|---|---|
| Prediction of Success | .062 |
| Confidence | .149 |
| Professional Background | .000 |
| Preparation | .000 |
| Personal Attributes | .002 |
| Instructional Skill | .002 |
| Classroom Management | .076 |
| Application of Knowledge | .000 |
| Holistic View of Education | .000 |
| Student Interactions | .000 |
| University Faculty Interactions | .000 |
| Professional Opportunities | .000 |

The p-values for nine of the categories disclosed a marked difference between the two groups being studied. A closer look at the data showed that the Project Opportunity student teachers had higher ratings. Professional behaviors, preparation, personal traits, instructional ability, applications of knowledge, holistic understanding, student interpersonal opportunities, faculty interaction and professional opportunities all have p-values of less than .05.

Predicted future success, personal confidence and classroom management did not show up significantly higher for the project group than the traditional group of student teachers. Although cooperating teachers and university supervisors rated the project student teachers high in each of those three categories, the students did not. (An explanation could be that as well prepared, informed and reflective students, they know quite well the problems facing them in a competitive job market, the many learning styles, behaviors and individual differences of students in each new classroom and they recognize the many difficult situations in teaching that can impact personal confidence.)

The survey form also contained a separate question asking student teachers to choose three key words which would best describe them from a list of fifteen given. The options were: **unsure, individualistic, confident, traditional, team player, innovative, open to ideas, challenged, flexible, leader, successful, average, striving, follower** and **stressed.**

The traditional student teachers chose flexible, open, confident and successful (in that order) as their top descriptors. Project Opportunity students selected confident, flexible, open and successful as their top four. The least frequent adjectives named were follower, unsure, average and traditional by both groups, but not in the same descending order, demonstrating no significant differences in the way they view themselves as a group.

## Cooperating Teacher/Supervisor Results

The combined cooperating teacher/supervisor survey form contained 44 questions. Since each student teacher had two cooperating teachers and two supervisors during the course of student teaching, if each person surveyed returned their form, there would be four surveys for each student teacher. In many cases, only 2 or 3 forms were returned for each student teacher. The number of responses from traditional cooperating teachers/supervisors was 931, a 74% response rate. For Project Opportunity cooperating teachers/supervisors it was 129. (A 60% response rate.)

The table below lists the p-values for each of the eight constructs, plus for one independent question, which was, "How prepared was the student teacher for student teaching?". (Once again, a t-test for independent samples was used to get the p-values.)

**TABLE 2**

| CONSTRUCTS | P-VALUES |
|---|---|
| Prediction of Success | .000 |
| Confidence | .000 |
| Professional Background | .000 |
| Preparation | .000 |
| Personal Attributes | .000 |
| Instructional Skill | .000 |
| Classroom Management | .000 |
| Application of Knowledge | .000 |
| How prepared was the student teacher for student teaching? | .000 |

By studying Table 2, it becomes obvious, that in every case, the difference between the contextually prepared student teachers and the traditional student teachers, from the points of view of supervisors and cooperating teachers, was significantly in favor of Project Opportunity student teachers. Since cooperating teachers and supervisors are individuals who have had more experience in evaluating student teachers and have the background to compare the two contrasting groups, it seems important to acknowledge that the difference between each group on all constructs is significant to the .000 degree. It is important to clarify, however, that in the case of cooperating teachers and supervisors, this was not a blind study. In the vast majority of cases, the respondents were aware that specific students were either Project Opportunity or not. It should be noted, however, that some cooperating teachers and supervisors were not sure about what would make a project student teacher different from a traditional student teacher.

The cooperating teachers and supervisors were also asked to select three adjectives from the list described in the student portion of the paper. Cooperating teachers working with traditional student teachers chose **open, flexible, confident and successful,** in that order. The coops working with Project Opportunity students selected the same four, but in a different order, **flexible, successful, open and confident.** Supervisors of traditional students selected **flexible, open, successful and confident,** whereas, supervisors of project student teachers opted for **confident, successful, flexible and open.** It is interesting to note that the same four adjectives were used by all coops and supervisors and that the same eleven were ignored. Beyond their agreement on the four choices, no real information could be inferred from the orders of selection, as all terms were positive in nature.

## Conclusion

As Project Opportunity completes its sixth year of operation, it has become apparent the major constructs of the program are working quite successfully. Students, faculty and public school personal have noted specific areas of excellence in these students. As shown in the cooperating teacher and university supervisor results, there is a visible difference between the groups of student teachers in each major category, and student surveys indicate strengths in nine of the twelve areas.

For the general faculty, Project Opportunity has taught many lessons, such as the importance of bonding within a cohort, the need for enhanced opportunities in research, the necessity of incorporating more classroom management techniques into coursework and most of all the urgency for more early and frequent field experiences.

Other successful thrusts of the program are the connections made within cohort groups and between the partner schools and cohort members which continues to grow in a positive manner. Ownership by participants has been evidenced through shared decision making and an active interchange of ideas. The bond between university faculty and public school participants has strengthened due to regular contacts and collaborative planning. Cohort students have acknowledged through informal conversations and journal reflections an apparent increase in confidence as educators. Most attribute this growth to the quality and quantity of field experiences offered in this program.

Moreover, public school educators and college supervisors support the emerging data indicating that Project Opportunity student teachers demonstrate higher confidence levels, advanced professional thinking and a more holistic view in thinking than traditionally prepared student teachers. As the survey has noted, students view themselves as well prepared professionals with strong backgrounds of knowledge and the ability to apply that learning.

They feel competent in their interpersonal characteristics and their professional abilities and view the "big picture" of education with a healthy, holistic understanding.

The main strengths of Project Opportunity, as identified by Iowa State University faculty members, the partnership school educators and the cohort students, include: 1) a cohort organization designed to build a pre-professional learning community; 2) articulation between and among courses and field experiences to create a coherent program; 3) early and continuing work with partner schools; 4) interdisciplinary program development with cross-disciplinary faculty collaboration on integrated curriculum development; 5) planning for research and program development; and 6) infusion of technology.

Evaluation of the contextual alternative program has led to both internal and external systemic changes and the main themes of Project Opportunity are quickly becoming main themes for the entire teacher education program at Iowa State. The ownership and responsibility felt by the faculty for the project and the infusion of its themes, is felt to be an important reason for the success of the program to date. Project Opportunity represents an attempt to address the issue of simultaneous renewal of K-12 schools and teacher education institutions. Through the close ties with K-12 students and teachers, the project is closely connected with current changes in the schools. The relationship is a truly collaborative one and changes in K-12 education influence Project Opportunity, just as participation in Project Opportunity alters the visions of teachers and administrators in schools. Through projects like this schools and teacher education institutions can learn from each other and transform themselves in close cooperation with each other, thus contributing to the success of both levels.

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